

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Translation, Storytelling and Multimodality

Journal Item

How to cite:

Doloughan, Fiona (2016). Translation, Storytelling and Multimodality. *Interférences littéraires/Littéraire interferences*, 19 pp. 107–122.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2016 Interférences littéraires/Littéraire interferences



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.interferenceslitteraires.be/index.php/illi/article/view/42>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk



Fiona Doloughan

Translation, storytelling and multimodality

Abstract

The work of Chinese-born British writer and film-maker, Xiaolu Guo, has been characterized to date by a focus on translation, broadly construed. Her “breakthrough” novel, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007), drew (retrospectively) on the process of language acquisition to construct the consciousness and experience of a Chinese learner of English as she interacts with her new cultural and social environment, in a hybrid narrative form that combines conceptual and narrative modes. Guo’s 2014 novel *I Am China* takes further her interest in translation as a mode of storytelling and a means of highlighting the problematics of travelling texts as well as movement of ideas and people across languages and cultures. This paper will reflect on Guo’s narrative modus operandi in relation to her focus on the possibilities and limitations of translation, both fictive and “real”, as a mode of critique and invention. It will situate Guo’s translational impulses within the context of discussions of pseudotranslation and the “translational turn” in the Humanities more broadly.

Résumé

L’œuvre de Xiaolu Guo, écrivain et cinéaste britannique d’origine chinoise, a été caractérisée jusqu’ici par une attention manifeste pour la traduction au sens large du terme. Dans son roman *A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007), Guo exploite (rétrospectivement) le processus de l’apprentissage des langues pour mettre en scène la conscience et l’expérience d’une étudiante en anglais d’origine chinoise alors qu’elle interagit avec son nouveau milieu culturel et social. A cet effet, l’auteur recourt à une narration hybride qui lui permet de combiner des modes narratifs et conceptuels. Dans son roman de 2014, *I Am China*, Guo développe son intérêt pour la traduction comme mode narratif et comme dispositif de mise en scène de la migration de textes, d’idées et de gens à travers les cultures et les langues. Cet article considère les modalités narratives adoptées par Guo en rapport avec son intérêt pour les possibilités et les limites de la traduction, fictive et réelle, comme véhicule de critique et d’invention. Par ce biais, il inscrit l’œuvre de Guo dans le contexte du débat sur la pseudo-traduction et dans celui d’un tournant plus général vers la traduction (*translational turn*) dans les sciences humaines.

To refer to this article:

Fiona DOLOUGHAN, “Translation, storytelling and multimodality”, in: *Interférences littéraires/Littéraire interferenties*, 19, « Pseudo-traduction. Enjeux métafictionnels/Pseudo-translation and metafictionality », Beatrijs VANACKER & Tom TOREMANS (eds.), November 2016, 107-122.



Interférences littéraires Literaire interferenties

Multilingual e-Journal for Literary Studies

COMITÉ DE DIRECTION – DIRECTIECOMITÉ

Anke GILLEIR (KU Leuven) – rédactrice en chef – hoofdredactrice

Beatrijs VANACKER (FWO-KU Leuven) – secrétaire de rédaction – redactiesecretaris

Sophie DUFAYS (UCL) – secrétaire de rédaction – redactiesecretaris

Elke D'HOKER (KU Leuven)

Lieven D'HULST (KU Leuven – Kortrijk)

Hubert ROLAND (FNRS – UCL)

Myriam WATTHEE-DELMOTTE (FNRS – UCL)

David MARTENS (KU Leuven)

Matthieu SERGIER (UCL & Université Saint-Louis -
Bruxelles)

Laurence VAN NUIJS (KU Leuven)

CONSEIL DE RÉDACTION – REDACTIERAAD

Geneviève FABRY (UCL)

Agnès GUIDERDONI (UCL)

Ortwin DE GRAEF (KU Leuven)

Jan HERMAN (KU Leuven)

Guido LATRÉ (UCL)

Nadia LIE (KU Leuven)

Michel LISSE (FNRS – UCL)

Anneleen MASSCHELEIN (KU Leuven)

Christophe MEURÉE (AML)

Reine MEYLAERTS (KU Leuven)

Stéphanie VANASTEN (UCL)

Bart VAN DEN BOSCHE (KU Leuven)

Marc VAN VAECK (KU Leuven)

COMITÉ SCIENTIFIQUE – WETENSCHAPPELIJK COMITÉ

Olivier AMMOUR-MAYEUR (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle –
Paris III & Université Toulouse II – Le Mirail)

Ingo BERENSMEYER (Universität Giessen)

Lars BERNAERTS (Universiteit Gent & Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

Faith BINCKES (Worcester College – Oxford)

Philip BOSSIER (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen)

Franca BRUERA (Università di Torino)

Àlvaro CEBALLOS VIRO (Université de Liège)

Christian CHELEBOURG (Université de Lorraine)

Edoardo COSTADURA (Friedrich Schiller Universität Jena)

Nicola CREIGHTON (Queen's University Belfast)

William M. DECKER (Oklahoma State University)

Ben DE BRUYN (Maastricht University)

Dirk DELABASTIA (Université de Namur)

Michel DELVILLE (Université de Liège)

César DOMINGUEZ (Universidad de Santiago de Compostela
& King's College)

Gillis DORLEIJN (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen)

Ute HEIDMANN (Université de Lausanne)

Klaus H. KIEFER (Ludwig Maximilians Universität München)

Michael KOLHAUER (Université de Savoie)

Isabelle KRZYWKOWSKI (Université Stendhal-Grenoble III)

Mathilde LABBÉ (Université Paris Sorbonne)

Sofiane LAGHOUATI (Musée Royal de Mariemont)

François LECERCLE (Université Paris Sorbonne)

Ilse LOGIE (Universiteit Gent)

Marc MAUFORT (Université Libre de Bruxelles)

Isabelle MEURET (Université Libre de Bruxelles)

Christina MORIN (University of Limerick)

Miguel NORBARTUBARRI (Universiteit Antwerpen)

Andréa OBERHUBER (Université de Montréal)

Jan OOSTERHOLT (Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg)

Maité SNAUWAERT (University of Alberta – Edmonton)

Pieter VERSTRAETEN (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen)

Interférences littéraires / Literaire interferenties

KU Leuven – Faculteit Letteren
Blijde-Inkomststraat 21 – Bus 3331
B 3000 Leuven (Belgium)

Contact : beatrijs.vanacker@kuleuvenbe – sophie.dufays@uclouvain.be

TRANSLATION, STORYTELLING AND MULTIMODALITY

Recent years have seen a quickening of interest in and increased reflection on the scope and problematics of translation. In the context of a special issue on pseudotranslation and metafiction, it is important to begin by indicating that the problematics of translation will be understood here in multiple but complementary and related senses. In this article, I will be referring more generally to some of the literature that takes issue with a narrowly conceived view of translation¹ and how it functions in the context of recent literary production that complicates taken-for-granted assumptions of source and target texts written in language A and translated into language B. My analysis will also further discussion of shifting accounts of pseudotranslation and its place in the literary system, as theorists in Translation Studies and Comparative Literature (e.g. Toury²; Apter³) focus their attention on the motivations for and effects of pseudotranslation or fictitious translations understood more broadly as a cultural and creative technique rather than necessarily as an act of deception or fraud. Taken cumulatively, this will support the view illustrated herein that what I am calling “narratives of translation”,⁴ that is works that reflect on and embody particular notions of translation in their storytelling practices and narrative construction, are in effect works with a strong metafictional and translational component. In essence, they are works that treat translation as a sometimes fictional, sometimes literal mode of writing, with implications for modes of reading, and are concerned with extending conceptions of what it means to write and to “translate” or “be translated” in the sense of movement (of self, of other, of texts and artefacts) across languages and cultures.

That the overarching term “translation” itself requires interrogation and unpacking has been under discussion for some time. The very title of Apter’s 2005 chapter, “Translation with No Original: Scandals of Textual Reproduction” helps situate pseudotranslation as a type of translation and flags up through use of the expression “textual reproduction” some of the issues relating to the values that cultures attach to “originals” as opposed to copies, while simultaneously alluding to the notion of literary DNA and cloning that Apter picks up in the course of the chapter. The idea that a work presented as a translation has, in fact, no original,

1. Doris BACHMANN-MEDICK, “Introduction: The translational turn”, in: *Translation Studies*, 2009, 2, 9, 2-16. Translated by Kate Sturge; Susan BASSNETT, “Translation studies at a cross-roads”, in: *Target: International Journal on Translation Studies*, 2012, 24, 1, 15-25.

2. Gideon TOURY, “Enhancing Cultural Changes By Means of Fictitious Translation”, in: Eva HUNG (ed.), *Translation and Cultural Change: Studies in history, norms and image-projection*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2005, 3-17.

3. Emily APTER, “Translation with No Original: Scandals of Textual Reproduction”, in: Sandra BERMANN and Michael WOOD (eds), *Translation/Transnation: Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005, 159-174.

4. Fiona DOLOUGHAN, *English as a Literature in Translation*, New York and London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

raises ethical considerations and Apter is concerned to tease out the consequences of this state of affairs for the “identity of what a translation is” in situations where the reader is either left floating in a sea of translate or where the ‘original’ is used “only as a fictive pretext” to launch or frame the narrative in question.⁵ The status of translation, she suggests, is called into question or tested in either case. In discussing the examples of Louÿs (*Les Chansons de Bilitis*, 1894) and Rexroth’s Marichiko poems (1974), she indicates that they can be seen as exposing “the ways in which all translators are to some extent counterfeit artists, experts at forgeries of voice and style” insofar as they are able to create an illusion that the text being read in translation is “an authentic copy of the original”.⁶ She goes on to review Benjamin’s notion of translatability and the afterlife given to a work in translation suggesting that he lays “the groundwork for defining translation in its most scandalous form: that is, as a technology of literary replication that engineers textual afterlife without recourse to a genetic origin”.⁷ Given that any number of translations can be made of the “same” text, all different but nevertheless serving to give it an afterlife, translation becomes the vehicle which affords to a work various forms of continued existence. The relevance of Apter’s chapter for “narratives of translation” is that she complicates expectations about the relationship between an original or source text and its (actual or fictive) translation proposing instead a model of textual reproduction that depends upon the ability to manipulate codes.

For Bassnett translation is not a transparent term free of history or ideological bias nor is it always clear what does or does not constitute a translation. Rather she suggests that it is more helpful to see translation as a set of often variable textual practices, involving collusion between reader and writer, along a continuous line that includes examples of self-translation and fictitious translation or “texts that claim to be translated from a non-existent source”.⁸ She takes issue with the rhetoric of fidelity to an original and notions of authenticity, pointing out that originality is a relatively modern concept dating from the Enlightenment and that more recent poststructuralist views have challenged neat and often value-laden binaries (e.g. original text/translation) and have used problematic cases of translation to revisit and complicate understandings of what is or is not a “genuine” translation. In sum, there has been much revisiting of conceptions of translation which highlight its inherent reflexivity and creativity as well as its role in enriching and extending literary culture across linguistic borders.

The increasing relevance of translation to those beyond Translation Studies as well as reflections on its broader scope is also picked up in Susan Bassnett’s 2012 *Target*⁹ article in which she argues that we need new ways of engaging with the increasingly intercultural writing being produced today by those with access to more than one language and culture. She challenges “insiders” in Translation Studies to look beyond the confines of their field and to rethink the parameters and locus of

5. Emily APTER, “Translation with no original”, 160.

6. *Ibid.*, 167.

7. *Ibid.*, 171.

8. Susan BASSNETT, “When is a Translation not a Translation?”, in: Susan BASSNETT and André LEFEVERE (eds.), *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters, 1998, 38.

9. Susan BASSNETT, “Translation studies at a cross-roads”, in: *Target: International Journal on Translation Studies*, 2012, 24, 1, 15-25.

their interest, while pointing to the dangers for “outsiders” of lack of engagement with or knowledge of existing specialist literature in Translation. The article’s title, “Translation studies at a crossroads”, points to the significance of the present as a possible turning point for the (inter-)discipline of Translation. In essence, the article amounts to a call to action in attending to the consequences for theories and practices of translation of new circuits of writing and reading.

Production of my recent monograph with the somewhat provocative title of *English as a Literature in Translation*,¹⁰ serves to make a further contribution to an ongoing debate regarding the importance, if not ubiquity, of issues of translation in a world of increasing plurilingualism among writers for whom English is just one of the languages to which they have access, even if they choose, or feel compelled, to write in it or a version of it. What unites the writers who serve as case studies on the role and extent of translation in the making of contemporary literature in English is the fact that they thematise and direct reader attention to these meta-fictional, constructive and creative aspects of translation in their work and engage consciously and explicitly with the dynamics of translation in their memoirs and fictions. Against the backdrop of notions of loss and gain in translation and discussion of how these are embedded in the narratives under consideration, I point to the relevance not just of individual circumstance but also of societal values and cultural politics in reading and interpreting narratives of translation. While it would be a simplification to suggest that the dominant notion of loss has been replaced over time in the literature by a sense of gain, I argue that in the space of a quarter of a century the rhetoric of loss has been mitigated by a sense of the very real gains which access to different languages and cultures can afford a writer in terms of narrative creativity and cognitive and cultural flexibility. In short, through a variety of textual mechanisms, these writers embed in their works reflections on what it means to cross cultural and linguistic boundaries and to live and write in translation. In complicating and extending notions of translation, they offer in narrative form the kind of insights expressed more conceptually in the critical and theoretical literature.¹¹

The notion that writers who range across languages and view one culture from the perspective of another are afforded different modes of cognition and enjoy (or suffer from) distinctive artistic sensibilities is not entirely new.¹² What has changed is the fact that increasingly translingualism and bilingualism are no longer regarded as exceptional states among a few writers such as Nabokov or Beckett. Rather, there is acknowledgement that as a consequence of shifting demographics and increased mobility alongside developments in communication technologies, translingual practices are more generally in evidence¹³ in music, advertising and the language arts more broadly, including literature. In short, the increasing volume of

10. Fiona DOLOUGHAN, *English as a Literature in Translation*, New York and London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

11. See, for example, Eva HOFFMAN, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, London, Vintage Books, 1989.

12. See Steven KELLMAN, *The Translingual Imagination*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 2000; Doris SOMMER, *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2004.

13. Suresh CANAGARAJAH, *Translingual Practice. Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations*, London and New York, Routledge, 2013.

publications¹⁴ that recognize the ways in which literary and artistic production is responding to changing conditions and shifting cultural practices is evidence of a new consciousness of the extent to which translation and translational processes lie at the very heart of literary production. To put this differently, the kind of binary presupposed by notions of “genuine” translation and pseudo or fictitious translation has been shown to be a false distinction that fails to take account of the dynamics of and motivation for works that explore translation as a process integral to textual production and reproduction today.

Furthermore, the rise of English as a lingua franca in conjunction with the pragmatics of communication in multilingual settings has begun to effect a change in attitudes to language use and in notions of acceptability, since successful communication often depends on a willingness to be flexible and responsive in one’s language use. To get a message across in a multilingual environment may require on the part of the speaker a degree of creative adaptation. Because literary practices often draw on or respond to ‘real world’ situations rather than being hermetically sealed and operating in a vacuum, multilingualism is increasingly being viewed as a legitimate resource for linguistic, literary and artistic practice. What the implications of this are for reading, as well as for writing, will be discussed below in relation to Guo’s work which exploits linguistic and cultural difference and explores what it means to translate and to be in translation. In what follows, consideration will be given to Guo’s reliance in her work on translation in both a narrow and a broad sense. The range of uses to which Guo puts translation as a mode of writing, and by extension reading, is considerable: from the literal to the metaphoric, from the ‘real’ to the ‘fictive’. In other words, as well as incorporating Chinese words, expressions, proverbs and ways of thinking into her work, she also exploits the metaphoric potentials of translation in demonstrating how moving across languages and cultures can open up creative possibilities through access to the affordances of different linguistic and cultural systems. In translating one culture for another (as in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*) or engaging with the metaphysics of translation (as in *I Am China*¹⁵), Guo explores translation as both critical encounter and resource for creativity.

As a film-maker as well as a novelist, short story writer and poet, Guo also brings to bear on her work a strong visual sense. She realizes this materially through inclusion in her novels of images, diagrams and realia that contribute in some cases to a kind of Barthesian “reality effect”, while in others they serve to disrupt the linear sequence, providing space for reflection. Images, like words, particularly words in a foreign language, require a form of interpretation and translation by the reader as s/he seeks to comprehend their import in the context of the unfolding narrative. Translation in both these senses, then, is part and parcel of Guo’s narrative drive and storytelling repertoire.

14. Penelope GARDNER-CHLOROS, “Multilingualism and the Arts: Introduction”, in: *The International Journal of Bilingualism*, 2014, 18, 2, 95-98; Rebecca WALKOWITZ, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*, New York, Colombia University Press, 2015.

15. Xiaolu GUO, *I Am China*, London, Chatto and Windus, 2014.

1. TRANSLATION AND TRANSLATIONAL WRITING

Guo's 2007 dictionary-novel, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*,¹⁶ skilfully employs the process of language acquisition in a work that thematises linguistic and cultural translation. By presenting a narrative that visibly reflects, through use of "broken English", what it means to learn another language and to understand or make sense of the culture in which that language is embedded, it draws attention to translational practices. While to begin with there is a good deal of humour involved in the construction and interrogation of what might appear stereotypes in terms of "English" and "Chinese" ways of talking, thinking and acting, as the narrative progresses, it offers more serious reflection on cultural difference and the impact of mobility on the construction of identity. This is a book where the level of English, in terms of syntactic complexity and range of vocabulary, increases to match the narrator's increasing grasp of the language's systemic properties, while struggling to reconcile the differences, both cultural and individual, that divide the main characters, Zhuang or Z, as she is known, and her older English boyfriend. In this sense, increasing control over the resources of English serves to mirror Z's increasing ability to express her thoughts and reflections. At the same time, however, and this is where the novel's lightness and humour begins to assume a darker edge, as Z's voice and sense of self develop, the love affair between Z and her boyfriend begins to dissolve or at least to become very fraught. The novel's mode of organization, which draws on dictionary entries (on "privacy" or "home", for example) to dramatize aspects of the protagonists' misunderstandings, serves as a kind of index of cultural difference. What is illustrated by narration of anecdotes, typical arguments and modes of behaviour is the extent to which the characters are products of their social environments, political systems and sets of cultural norms and values. Their desires and expectations are, to an extent, a consequence of socialization and education as well as being grounded in linguistic and cultural habits. Part of what the novel explores is the ways in which identity is constructed through language and culture and what is involved in the process of translation both of self and of other.

For to move from one language and culture to another inevitably involves translation, both literal and metaphorical. Z leaves Beijing for London and swaps Chinese for English. In doing so, she does not simply erase one as she assumes another; rather, she carries China and Chinese with her and they form a backdrop against which the accumulation of English sounds, sights and customs are considered and evaluated. Indeed arrival in London Heathrow [sic] from Beijing is fraught with dangers for a young Chinese woman, armed with a small red dictionary, like Mao's Little Red Book, and limited English. Right from Z's point of entry into the UK from China, she is aware of cultural difference and of her positioning as "alien" or other. As the passengers disembark and separate into two queues, "Alien" and "Non-Alien", the narrator comments: "I am alien, like Hollywood film *Alien*, I live in another planet with funny looking and strange language".¹⁷ Remembering the conversational routines presented in her English-language textbook, she points to the absurdity of a language where question and answer are the same: "*How are you?*/"

16. Xiaolu GUO, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, London, Chatto and Windus, 2007.

17. Xiaolu GUO, *ibid.*, 9.

*I am very well. How are you?/ I am very well*¹⁸ and brings in reference to the English translation of an old Chinese proverb, also reproduced in Chinese characters on the page: “*Birds have their bird language, beasts have their talk* [...] English they totally another species.”¹⁹ The humour which pervades the narrative, at least initially, continues as Z meets the immigration officer who holds her passport “behind his account”,²⁰ finally stamping on her visa, as she puts it. For anyone who has had to learn another language and has experienced what it means to make unintentional errors that others find amusing, these comic and suggestive slips provide relief for the reader from Z’s expressions of fear as she enters the unknown and fails to understand what people around her say without help from her Concise Chinese-English dictionary.

Her experience of London is mediated through what she has read in language learning textbooks and Dickensian novels and what she has seen on television back in China. As she negotiates the city and the pitfalls of an unfamiliar language and culture, the reader is presented with a view of London from the perspective of a “non-native” speaker and writer of English. Parts of English culture, when viewed through “foreign” eyes, take on sometimes comic, sometimes alien aspects, as food, customs and foreign phrases are interrogated and defamiliarized. There are numerous examples of this but to pick out just a few: having read the Chinese translation of Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, which appears to translate literally into English as *Foggy City Orphan*, the narrator expects to find London full of fog and is disappointed when it is not immediately visible. She stops a policeman and asks to be directed to it.

“Excuse me, where I seeing the fogs?” [...]

“Sorry?”, he says.

“I waiting two days already, but no fogs,” I say.²¹

This small example indicates how new arrivals to a country encountered only in literature, television or other media, can have misconceptions about their environment. They read and interpret the new culture through a comparative lens and bring to their experience of it prior knowledge, preconceptions and images from a repository both cultural and personal.

The full English breakfast, which is another dictionary entry, also elicits comment from a Chinese perspective insofar as it appears massive and the kind of food appropriate to labourers or construction workers. The descriptions are choice:

Food like messy scrambled eggs, very salty bacons, burned bread, very thick milk, sweet bean in orange sauce, coffee, tea, milk, juice [...] But 8.30 in the morning I refuse accepting two oily sausage, whatever it made by pork or by vegetables, is just too fat for a little Chinese.²²

18. *Ibid.*, italics in original.

19. *Ibid.*, 10; italics in original.

20. *Ibidem.*

21. *Ibid.*, 21.

22. *Ibid.*, 16-17.

This passage manages to make both strange and exotic food that for an English reader is likely to be unremarkable by virtue of being part of a familiar culinary setting. The choice of “scrumped”, rather than “scrambled” eggs arguably adds to the sense of messiness. Whether or not it combines “crumpled” with “scrambled”, its hybrid status is felicitous, suggesting a mix of something vaguely recognizable and something unusual or unfamiliar. The formulation of baked beans in terms more likely to be found on a menu at a Chinese restaurant, “sweet bean in orange sauce”, demonstrates the way in which Z translates into English aspects of Chinese culture or brings to English Chinese ‘accents’ and flavours. The not-so-veiled criticism of English cuisine or at least of the ‘oily’ sausages is rendered more palatable(!) by drawing attention to the early morning hour for digesting such things and to the slightness of the diner.

Not only is language unfathomable at times, for example the exact meaning of “properly” as it is used by an irate taxi driver who commands Z to “Shut the door properly!”²³ so are some of the customs, habits and ways of thinking of English people for Z. For example, Z’s boyfriend has a strong notion of privacy which she violates by reading his diary in his absence. She muses on whether it is possible to sustain intimacy with someone for whom it is important to keep some things to himself. The relationship between the personal and the social is articulated in Z’s musings on aspects of English society that she has observed, such as the fact that lovers don’t necessarily live together but maybe “sleep together twice a week”²⁴. Z goes on to consider the fact that many old people in the West live in Old People’s Homes rather than with their families. She sees such a society as being in sharp contrast to that of China where “family means everything”²⁵.

As indicated previously, Guo explores translation in her work at a number of levels simultaneously. There is translation ‘proper’ where expressions in Chinese are rendered into English and vice versa. For example, under the dictionary entry “fertilise”²⁶, the names of vegetables, trees and flowers to be found in Z’s boyfriend’s garden are rendered in Chinese with their literal translation into English. Translation also operates in terms of Z representing and explaining Chinese culture to those she meets in England, including her boyfriend. In terms of having to construct a voice and an identity for herself in a new language and culture, Z struggles to retain something of her Chinese “self”, while adapting to her new environment. There are moments when she rejects the imposition of another language and culture and refuses to speak or write English which she begins to see as dominating her and overwhelming her. She experiences the violence associated with having to live in translation, of being forced to use someone else’s language and accommodate to someone else’s norms.

2. TRANSLATION AS RESISTANCE AND CRITIQUE

That acts of translation and non-translation have a strong political dimension should come as no surprise to a readership familiar with discourses of post-

23. *Ibid.*, 19.

24. *Ibid.*, 109.

25. *Ibidem.*

26. *Ibid.*, 62-67.

colonialism. As Spivak²⁷ reminds us, “there is so much of the old colonial attitude, slightly displaced, in the translation racket”. Questions such as the relative “status” of a language in terms of its dominance and/or its perceived cultural and economic capital, alongside communicational imperatives and notions of accessibility mean that there are inequalities in the distribution and representation of languages. What gets translated and the manner of its translation in terms of a foreignizing or domesticating orientation, for example, is often the result of cultural bias, such as the Anglo-American preference for a text in translation that reads as if it was originally written in the translated language, rather than individual choice. As a novelist writing in a second language, Guo is well aware of how writers and their works get positioned in the literary marketplace and embeds in her fiction a dramatization of the politics of language. As the dictionary entry under “nonsense”²⁸ makes clear, Z feels anger, frustration and a sense of violation, as English imposes its will on her. She feels subjugated by a historically imperialist language and culture that appears ignorant of her own. Following a definition of ‘nonsense’ in English, the text continues in Chinese, a means of excluding the non-Chinese reader and, in essence, turning the tables on “monolingual superiority”.²⁹ The so-called “Editor’s translation” on the next page³⁰ reveals the extent of Z’s distress: “I have become so small, so tiny, while the English culture surrounding me becomes enormous. It swallows me, and it rapes me. I am dominated by it.”³¹ The language of power and the language of sexual politics become intertwined, as Z experiences what she sees as wilful subordination of one language and culture to another. Z goes on to acknowledge the “pain of studying Chinese characters”³² as a child at school and muses on the difficulties of the language learning and communicational processes. Yet what has the potential to shock the reader is the violence of the language used at this point in the narrative. The role of the Editor’s translation is to make visible the power differential between languages (English vs Chinese) at the same time as it points to the ability of the bilingual speaker or writer to range across languages and cultures and to understand, or at least interact with, both. To withhold a translation from Chinese would have resulted in the exclusion of the non-Chinese-speaking reader. Its inclusion serves to signal the reader’s reliance on translation and in essence to reverse, if only momentarily, the roles projected in the novel. If Z’s cultural bumps and linguistic gaffes in the novel are humorous at times, the English reader is reminded through the Editor’s translation that choice of language is profoundly political and that acts of translation and interpretation can be played out in different ways. Within the context of a novel written in progressively “better” English, a page of Chinese characters, seemingly without translation is disruptive. Yet, arguably, reading English inflected with Chinese ‘accents’ is as much a job of translation and interpretation as is translation from Chinese into English.³³ The question of when and how to translate is also foregrounded in the sense that lack of an Editor’s trans-

27. Gayatri SPIVAK, “The Politics of Translation”, in: Lawrence VENUTI (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader* (2nd edition), New York and London, Routledge, 2004 (1992), 369-388.

28. Xiaolu GUO, *Dictionary*, 179.

29. Gayatri SPIVAK, *ibid.*, 381.

30. Xiaolu GUO, *Dictionary*, 180.

31. *Ibidem.*

32. *Ibidem.*

33. Evelyn CH’IEN, *Weird English*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2004.

lation here would leave a visible gap in understanding for the non-Chinese Anglo-phone reader. While the identity of the editor is not given, the role or function and its capitalization is sufficient to flag up issues of comprehensibility and linguistic and cultural access, since without access to a script or language, the reader finds him- or herself facing “something that has or makes no sense”,³⁴ not because of its inherently nonsensical qualities but because access is denied through lack of knowledge. To this extent it is the reader, rather than Z, who is shown to be deficient or ignorant.

Moreover, *A Concise-Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers* includes the visual as a design element in the narrative, a feature of Guo’s work that continues into novels such as *UFO in Her Eyes*³⁵ and is also an important aspect of *I Am China*, as discussed below. As a film-maker, as well as a writer of fiction and a poet, Guo is alert to the meaning potential of the visual as well as the verbal. Inclusion of realia such as a page from a passport,³⁶ itemized menus,³⁷ sets of instructions,³⁸ handwritten lists³⁹ and extracts from letters⁴⁰ and diary entries⁴¹ help provide a sense of authenticity as well as being the kind of material on which a learner of English might focus. While the notion of authenticity can be subjected to critical interrogation, there is a sense in which something presented as demonstrably hailing from and representative of a particular source culture is seen to acquire merit and adds to the illusionist agenda. It is a kind of translational shorthand or visible cultural marker which serves to strengthen the illusion of attribution to a specific place and time. The dictionary form itself is notable in this regard, since it provides a particular narrative model or mode of organization. Guo has acknowledged her debt to Barthes⁴² in respect of fixing on this particular way of organizing her narrative around keywords as is the case in *A Lover’s Discourse*.⁴³ Access to literature in translation, as Guo first read Barthes in Chinese rather than in French or English, becomes another source of novelistic creativity and another form of translation.

3. FICTIONAL TRANSLATION AS NARRATIVE RESOURCE

In *I Am China* the meanings, values and functions of translation are further extended in a novel that is constructed on the premise of fictional translation. A brief plot summary will help to situate the meanings of translation discussed below where, as will be seen, translation is the very driver of the novel. Scottish translator Iona Kirkpatrick has been sent an ill-assorted bunch of documents in Chinese by editor Jonathan Barker of Applegate Books with a request for a rough translation in order to see whether or not the material is worth publishing. As Iona

34. Xiaolu GUO, *Dictionary*, 179.

35. Xiaolu GUO, *UFO in Her Eyes*, London, Chatto and Windus, 2009.

36. Xiaolu GUO, *Dictionary*, 4.

37. *Ibid.*, 16, 33.

38. *Ibid.*, 69-71.

39. *Ibid.*, 77.

40. *Ibid.*, 91.

41. *Ibid.*, 93-95.

42. Roland BARTHES, *A Lover’s Discourse: fragments*, London, Jonathan Cape, transl. by Richard Howard, 1979.

43. Interview with Xiaolu Guo conducted by Fiona Doloughan on behalf of the Open University, 2013.

begins her translation job and sifts through the material composed of diary entries and letters in different handwriting, she comes to understand the significance of what she is reading—material relating to the situations, amorous and political, of a young Chinese couple, Jian and Mu, separated after the former has been removed from China for dissident activities. Jian arrives in the UK but is not given leave to remain in the country: he is then sent to Switzerland where he is allowed to remain for a year pending resolution of his asylum case. Rather than await the outcome of his case, Jian crosses the border into France and eventually ends up working in a Chinese restaurant. He adopts another identity and uses it to move more freely from job to job and place to place. He ends up in Crete, where his body is discovered and his identity revealed by Iona whose interest in the material she has been translating becomes obsessive. Mu's story is also untangled and the reader learns of the death of the son she had with Jian; Jian and Mu's separation; Mu's parent's ill-health and her decision to travel first to the US, then to the UK.

The role played by translation in the novel is multiple and relates both to translation in a narrow sense – transfer of content from Chinese into English – and a broader sense, what it means to be forced to cross cultures, having been expelled from one's own country and live in translation. Indeed, the narrative unfolds in relation to Iona's ability to understand and piece together what she is translating, a job made more difficult by the lack of context, problems of deciphering handwriting and the challenges of register. Even though she is a trained translator educated at a leading British institution, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, Iona realizes that she does not always have access to the kind of youthful, "street" language that she finds in the letters. Similarly, what she, and by extension through her the reader, finds is that without sufficient context the job of translation is made more difficult. While the importance of the relationship between text and context might be seen as an operative principle informing, to differing degrees, any translation, what *I Am China* illustrates is their necessary connection.

For without relevant contextualizing information and pertinent linguistic and cultural knowledge, translation remains superficial or opaque. To render in all the complexity and "thickness" of their lived experience a sense of who protagonists Jian and Mu are and what fate befell them requires a doggedness bordering on obsession. The role of the translator is not limited in this instance to one of cultural and linguistic mediator in a conventional sense nor to the transfer of content from one language to another. Rather, Iona's deep investment in her translation "job" is both a driver of the narrative and the means by which it comes into being. She is, in a sense, not just mediator but also creator of a story that she "realizes" through the translational process. What is on display in the novel is the cultural, as well as linguistic, materiality of translation as an investigative, research-led, multi-dimensional and creative process, rather than just a finished product. This materiality is evidenced in a number of ways, perhaps most visibly by inclusion of samples of the handwritten diary entries and letters exchanged by Jian and Mu, the Chinese protagonists whose lives Iona translates and whose story she pieces together from the fragments before her. Inclusion of these fragments as well as reflections on their translation point to and stand in as evidence of the fictional original.

The manner in which the narrative is constructed including as it does nine chapters, a Prelude and a Postscript, with particular chapters or sections thereof

focusing on the perspective of one or other of the characters, puts the reader in a position to fill in some of the gaps that Iona experiences as she translates or at least gets to know the characters better. What comes to the fore is a sense of the “difference” between the “facts” of a life and the ways in which it is experienced or lived by the protagonists themselves. The fact that this lived experience is articulated through diary entries and letters, which are understood to be originally in a different language, is seen to add yet another level of complexity to a desire to interpret and understand an individual’s trajectory. The chronology of selected events of importance in China in the last century (from 1912 to 2012) provided as an Appendix⁴⁴ for the reader is a kind of skeleton frame on which to hang some of the culture-specific references within the text. The “Misty” poets, for example, refers to a group of xxth century Chinese poets whose work challenged social realism in art and promoted a more subjective and lyrical style noted for the “mistiness” or “haziness” of its images. Many of these poets were exiled after Tiananmen Square as their work was seen as challenging the status quo. Inclusion of the appendix, comprising as it does real events and the trajectory of fictional subjects, also provides a sense of the “reality” of the lives of fictional characters, inserted as they are into a historical frame. Biography and story, fact and fiction are intertwined to a large extent. While this is a novel in English published in the UK, it incorporates a narrative that may be deemed sensitive in a Chinese context, reflecting as it does on recent Chinese history. It is a love story that depends, for its publication and circulation, on translation and on the struggle of a particular translator to bring it to light and do it justice. In so doing, Iona reflects not only on Jian’s and Mu’s situation as she struggles to unravel their story and construct a chronology from the documents before her, but also on her own situation. In this sense her translation of the lives of others leads her back to a kind of stocktaking of her own situation. Her relative isolation and mistrust of others, her problematic relationship with food and with men, is brought into opposition with the emerging love story-in-translation between punk musician Jian and his lover Mu, from whom he is separated as a consequence of history and of fate.

In some ways *I Am China* presents the reader with an emerging picture of two main characters, whose biography, history and sense of identity must be pieced together to make a story. The reader learns that Jian is the son of a high-ranking Communist official and that he has been ordered into exile following the writing and distribution of an anti-government manifesto at a music event. Translated from one context to another, as he is moved from England to Switzerland before “disappearing” in France and ending up in Crete, he reconsiders his life and his values, reflecting on the importance of the personal in the face of the political. This battle between the political and the personal is played out and translated across a number of contexts both within and outside China, as the reader encounters the exiled Jian in a psychiatric hospital in Lincolnshire, an Immigration Removal Centre in Dover and a Centre for Asylum Seekers in Switzerland. In effect, while the focus of *I Am China* is on the plight of two Chinese young people, their brush with recent history, their romantic entanglement and their quest to realize their ambitions through art and politics, there is also reference to current states of affairs in the UK and in Continental Europe in respect of migration and asylum policies and practices. Jian moves across borders and territories, encountering different legal systems, first in

44. Xiaolu GUO, *I am China*, 372.

the UK and then in Switzerland, systems which have a direct bearing on his situation. From the psychiatric hospital in Lincolnshire, where he has been sent after violent contestation of rejection of his asylum application, he decides to take matters into his own hands and writes a letter (in English, one assumes) to her Majesty the Queen, explaining his situation. While at one level humorous, Jian's situation and his letter are also an indictment of a system that fails to recognize the plight of those who have fled oppressive regimes. Rather than being given sanctuary, Jian is misdiagnosed and punished for fighting back against a system that he finds bureaucratic and incomprehensible and which treats him no more humanely than the one he has left behind.

Inclusion of references to aspects of political and cultural life in Guo's novel is a means of incorporating social critique but it is social critique laced with a measure of sardonic humour, Jian's letter to the Queen being a case in point. Jian encloses a copy of his band's most famous album in his letter. The reply he receives includes his returned letter with a little card indicating the correct process for corresponding with the Queen through her Lady-in-Waiting. Jian writes again indicating what will happen if he is returned to China: "if they send me back to China, I will be yet another imprisoned artist"⁴⁵ and adding in a postscript that if the Queen has already decided not to help him she should return his CD! But this correspondence with the Queen is more than just a humorous aside. Towards the end of the novel, a reply from the Queen is reproduced, made all the more poignant in the face of Jian's death, in which she distances her role as Monarch from that of government and exhorts him to be patient and to let legal process take its course.

Reference to one of the songs on Jian's CD, "Long March into the Night" and inclusion of an image representing the album cover at the bottom of his first letter to the Queen⁴⁶ turns out to connect with or have echoes of a real album: that of Chinese rock star Cui Jian, a musician who sang at Tiananmen Square. Co-incidentally, Cui Jian's 1988 album is entitled "Rock 'n Roll on the New Long March". It includes a song entitled "Nothing to my Name", in English translation, which Cui Jian has sung wearing a red blindfold since the events at Tiananmen. The image reproduced in *I Am China*⁴⁷ features a young man with longish hair wearing a blindfold with the letters "Yuan vs Dollars" written in bold down the left-hand side, reminiscent of images of the young Cui Jian to be found on the web. This transformation of aspects of political and cultural life in China into the pages of Guo's novel is a further translation, one realized multimodally through incorporation of text and image in the novel. In essence the novel draws on a network of cultural references translating them to new contexts and audiences and transforming them in the process of their reactivation. So, for example, the Allen Ginsberg poem "America" is exploited in the novel such that Mu, who has toured the US as Sabotage Sister with a group of Chinese musicians, recites it in modified form at a performance poetry event at Foyles bookstore in London replacing the word America with China. This substitution of one country for another serves to transform the meanings of the original or source text, rendering it in the process into a modern-day critique of China. The very title of the novel, *I Am China*, is derived from the

45. *Ibid.*, 31.

46. *Ibid.*, 21.

47. *Ibid.*, 21, 356.

transposed Ginsberg poem but also draws on and refers to the manifesto presumed to be that distributed by Jian at the music event where he and other members of the band were arrested. The final article of the manifesto entitled 'Break the Spell' says: "I am China. We are China. The people. Not the state",⁴⁸ thus linking the transformed Ginsberg poem, the manifesto and the title of the novel.

Of course it may be that these echoes are not apparent to all readers of *I Am China* and the question then arises whether failure to spot them mars understanding of the novel. At the level of story, the situations of Jian, Mu and their translator Iona are sufficiently well realized to make them credible and comprehensible. What may be added to the narrative for a reader for whom the references and allusions are accessible is greater awareness of the social and political critique that underpins a novel rich in cultural capital and the product of different and intersecting languages and cultures.

It is not overstating the case to suggest that translation in all its dimensions makes up the very fabric of *I Am China*. The story of Jian and Mu is revealed through translation, as the characters' letters and diary entries are rendered for the reader in English translation by Scottish translator Iona. That Iona is Scottish, rather than English, may not be incidental but motivated by a sense of the UK's political and linguistic geographies.⁴⁹ But the story emerges not just via this process of fictional translation, albeit one that is represented mimetically. The novel as a whole is structured in such a way that the reader is exposed to the consciousness of all three protagonists, Jian, Mu and Iona by a third person narrator who reports their actions and thoughts to the reader and through use of free indirect speech gives the illusion, at times, of unmediated access to their consciousness. Insofar as the author-narrator controls and mediates access to information and elements of the storyworld, she is regulating how these characters' lives get translated by the reader. In this connection, the conversation between Iona and her former professor at SOAS, Charles Handfield, is enlightening. Iona has sought his advice in relation to the translation of Jian's rather colloquial style. Iona indicates that for her translation has to do with "making people intelligible" and getting "inside a person's inner culture".⁵⁰ Charles suggests that now and again in order to achieve this it is necessary for the great translator to "go beyond what they know", "to go beyond translation and its techniques and tricks, and be absolutely human".⁵¹ In some ways, this scene can be read as a dramatization of different approaches to translation. In translating the lives of others, how is it best to proceed: to try to reproduce the idiosyncracies of another's style as faithfully as possible in translation or to depart from orthodoxies and find a connecting thread that relates one human to another.

The matter then of translating a sensibility has to do, at least in part, with recognizing the gaps and omissions and filling them in by creating a plausible or coherent narrative or alternatively accepting the fact that not everything can be easily translated but

48. *Ibid.*, 363.

49. At an event on "Multilingual Writing" at the Free Word Centre, London on September 29, 2016, Guo indicated that the choice of Scottish translator was originally motivated by an interest in differences between "island" and "continental" mentalities. Yet, Iona, who hails from an island within an island, is representative of those in parts of Scotland who historically have grown up with the co-existence of languages (Gaelic, Scots English, English).

50. Xiaolu GUO, *I am China*, 215.

51. *Ibid.*, 215.

that some things resist translation or are ultimately unknowable or untranslatable. If this parallel between translating and the construction of narrative seems to be stretching it a bit, it can be seen to be justified by reference to a comment whose status is ambivalent in terms of being attributable to Iona or the narrator. As Iona begins work on the translation of Mu's letters, she is struck by the search for a different voice, since it is not just the handwriting that distinguishes Jian's letters from those of Mu. The comment reads: "Perhaps translating is another kind of storytelling: finding the writer's voice, unravelling the narrator".⁵² Such an explicit link, albeit one that is couched in tentative rather than affirmative language, serves to build a bridge by association between the two activities and to form a connection between translation and storytelling. For the idea that translation simply involves textual transfer rather than "a great deal of textual manipulation"⁵³ is shown in *I Am China* to be a gross simplification, as is the notion that the translator is simply a conduit through which a text travels or passes. On the contrary, we see translator Iona struggling with and constructing a context and a storyline that informs her translation of the documents she receives. She actively negotiates meaning and "[in] that process of negotiation, all kinds of changes take place, on several different levels".⁵⁴

*

* *

Within the context of a focus on the work of Xiaolu Guo, this article has sought to show the extent to which translation has become increasingly central in contemporary fiction as a critical concern and as a mode of writing and of storytelling. Not only does Guo's work in English depend on knowledge of and interaction with other languages, principally but not exclusively Chinese, it also draws on modalities beyond the verbal, such as the visual, to "translate", in a broader sense, an artistic vision that crosses not only languages and cultures but also disciplines (philosophy, literature, film) and genres (i.e. the dictionary-novel) to create a body of work that is helping to expand the novel form in the XXIst century and realize its multimodal potential. As a translingual writer with access to both Chinese and English, an English acquired relatively late in life, Guo demonstrates in her work both the creative and critical power of translation and of translational writing. She shows how translation as a mode can be used to drive the plot as well as to constitute a narrative whose central concern is with what it means to leave home, either as a matter of choice (Mu) or necessity (Jian), and to cross languages and cultures. In short, Guo's work explores living in translation from the dual perspective of producer and consumer of fictions in translation.

FIONA DOLOUGHAN

Open University
fiona.doloughan@open.ac.uk

52. *Ibid.*, 65.

53. Susan BASSNETT, "Travelling and Translating", in: *World Literature in English*, 2004, 40, 2, 70.

54. *Ibid.*, 71.